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US-SOVIET RELATIONS AND THE BREZHNEV SUCCESSION

Summary

The Soviets almost certainly will use the occasion of the Brezhnev succession to reinforce their efforts to effect a change in US policy toward the USSR. To this end, they are likely to make non-substantive conciliatory gestures, hoping that the US will view the succession as an opportunity to make a fresh start in bilateral relations. Because of their current negative assessment of US policy, however, the Soviets probably do not have any high expectation that this will happen. Consequently, they are engaged in concurrent tactical maneuvering to relieve pressures on their eastern and western flanks prior to Brezhnev's departure. [redacted] 25X1

Succession Foreign Policy

Because the internal and external circumstances surrounding the impending leadership change differ markedly from earlier circumstances, Soviet behavior during the two previous postwar successions offers little guidance as to how the USSR will act or what policies it expects the US to follow during the Brezhnev transition. [redacted] 25X1

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] **of the Current Support Division, Office of Soviet Analysis, at the request of** [redacted] **A/NIO/USSR-EE. Any comments and/or suggestions may be directed to Chief, Current Support Division** [redacted]

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The post-Stalin leadership was deeply divided on foreign policy issues, and internal jockeying for power opened the way for emergence of a moderate line on such key East-West issues as a Korean armistice and an Austrian neutrality agreement. Their search for a partial detente coincided with Western interest in reducing Cold War tensions. [redacted] 25X1

After Khrushchev, the Soviet leadership maintained a united front on foreign affairs and generally avoided unsettling initiatives during their first few years in power. They looked for ways to ease the growing breach with China but this foundered on their unwillingness to make or possibly agree to significant concessions on major points of contention. They also rejected US overtures for continuing and expanding the limited detente that began after the Cuban missile crisis, citing US military action against a socialist ally, Vietnam, as the principal reason. But the post-Khrushchev leadership, like Stalin's successors, encountered relatively favorable international circumstances, not because their major adversaries were interested in a detente but because they were either preoccupied by internal discord--in the case of China's Cultural Revolution--or foreign military involvement in the case of US action in Vietnam. [redacted] 25X1

The Brezhnev succession differs from these previous successions both in the way in which it is unfolding and in the USSR's international situation. Brezhnev's departure presumably will not be triggered by a sudden, unexpected event like Stalin's death or Khrushchev's ouster. It already is a gradual process set in motion by the General Secretary's declining health and political power. Both the Soviet leadership and foreign statesmen thus have had time to anticipate and prepare for Brezhnev's departure. [redacted] 25X1

From their contacts with US officials and private citizens, as well as from their scrutiny of the US media, the Soviets know there is an intense and unprecedented discussion in the West about the succession and its implications for Soviet and US policy. They probably find this discussion confusing, given the range of opinions being presented, and they probably are unable to assess how the leadership change might affect US behavior. They probably fear, however, that the US might seek to exploit the resultant diffusion of power and the political uncertainty surrounding it. While the Soviets are confident that the US can do little to affect internal Soviet politics or the succession directly, they know that it can influence Soviet policy and affect Soviet global interests at the margins by shaping the external circumstances in which the leadership transition will occur. [redacted] 25X1

The post-Brezhnev leadership will not be favored by a period of relative calm on the international front. In addition to mounting domestic economic problems, the new leadership will inherit the apparently intractable foreign policy problems now facing the USSR. Poland and Afghanistan are the primary

examples. In addition, the Soviets have tried and failed to ease tensions with post-Mao China; they are trying once again but the results so far are unpromising. They had hoped that a change of Administrations in the US would allow them to reverse the deteriorating course of US-Soviet relations that began in the mid-seventies and intensified thereafter, but their expectations proved unfounded. Thus, foreign policy issues will confront the post-Brezhnev leaders with a vengeance, and the succession leaders will thus have to reinvigorate efforts to fashion a more favorable--or at least less damaging--external situation. [redacted] 25X1

Moscow's Wish List

Barring a major improvement in relations with the US prior to Brezhnev's departure or a decision to abandon such improvement as a policy goal, the Soviets will pursue the breakthrough in bilateral relations they have sought since last year's Party Congress. Moscow by its actions and statements appears convinced that a direct and comprehensive dialogue offers the best way to affect US choices and constrain US options. In particular, a resumption of a dialogue would offer the possibility of halting or at least limiting what the Soviets regard as adverse trends in the full range of US policies toward the USSR. [redacted] 25X1

The post-Brezhnev leadership, which initially will be composed of the same principal figures now in power, may attempt to convince the US that the succession is an opportunity to make a fresh start in bilateral relations and to resume what the Soviets regarded as the "serious and businesslike" negotiations of the early 1970s. (The Soviets welcomed the initiation of the INF and START talks, but they probably view the US decision more as a tactical maneuver to quell advocates of the peace and nuclear freeze movements than as an actual determination to seek agreements.) [redacted] 25X1

The Soviets probably will try to encourage such a US response, even if they do not have high hopes that they will succeed. They could offer procedural, rather than substantive, concessions with the attendant message that such "flexibility" represents the beginning of a long-term and permanent shift in Soviet policy that should be nurtured by some reciprocal conciliation on the US side. Moreover, the Soviets are likely to seek to convince the US that its actions, if not more forthcoming, could tip the balance in the Kremlin toward the "hardliners". [redacted] 25X1

The Soviets probably expect that the US would see the transparently tactical purpose behind these initial moves, but would hope that the US would respond positively, if cautiously, in the belief that a positive response could eventually produce genuine Soviet compromises on some issues. In this situation the new leadership would not expect much more than to renew US interest in convening a summit meeting. They would welcome such a summit, even if it did not result in substantive agreements.

By giving US-Soviet relations at least a temporary positive tone, it would afford Moscow a respite from its "America problem" during the post-Brezhnev transition. The new leadership could cite such a meeting as an achievement of their "peace" policy, thereby enhancing their image in Western Europe--and in Eastern Europe as well since most of their Warsaw Pact partners resent Soviet constraint on their own freedom of action during periods of tense US-Soviet relations. Moscow would benefit by a thaw in US-Soviet relations as it would enable them to serve notice on the Chinese that it too has a "US card". [redacted] 25X1

Moscow's Expectations Regarding US Behavior

Nevertheless, the new leadership would not be sanguine that the US would adopt such an exploratory response. This judgment would be determined by their current assessment of US policy. Commentaries and private remarks by Soviet officials suggest that Moscow does not expect any "positive" developments to emerge in bilateral relations at least during the next few years. [redacted] 25X1

From the Soviet viewpoint, each critical juncture in relations over the past year and a half appears to have resulted in a "tougher" rather than a more conciliatory US policy. Any hope that this trend could be reversed probably has been dashed by the institution of martial law in Poland and the subsequent application of US economic sanctions. The more recent US decision to expand sanctions directed against the Siberian natural gas pipeline to exports by American subsidiaries and licensees in Europe has confirmed this view. [redacted] 25X1

The Soviet perception that the US believes the succession initially will weaken Soviet resolve and constrain external activism may also raise disquieting questions in Moscow. The Soviets probably consider that the US would not provide relief for the USSR on the international front, but would welcome the paralysis of decisionmaking that a prolonged and bitter succession struggle would produce. [redacted] 25X1

Such a perception of US opportunism could give the new leadership an incentive to close ranks and attempt to project an image of unity and decisiveness in foreign affairs. Privately, the Soviets probably would serve notice that they do not intend to be provoked by US actions while suggesting that it would be counterproductive if not dangerous to test them during the post-Brezhnev transition. They also might increase their own level of foreign affairs activity, especially symbolic gestures that would demonstrate their capability to act. This, they would hope, would cause US concern that Moscow could turn the succession to its own advantage by repairing troubled relations with countries such as Egypt or China. [redacted] 25X1

Nevertheless, this pessimistic perception probably will not preclude the succession leaders from probing for an improvement in bilateral relations. They are likely to continue pursuing

this policy, which was laid down at the last Party Congress, even if they calculate that it has little chance of succeeding. There is no risk involved in signaling an interest in improved relations. Even if they failed, they would gain credit in the eyes of the West Europeans, and they could shift gears quickly if their signals failed to produce a positive response. The potential payoff in a relaxation of tensions with the US during the critical leadership transition, however, probably is sufficient to encourage Moscow in this direction. [redacted] 25X1

Pre-Succession Diplomatic Moves?

The Soviets already have taken moves that appear to be aimed at reducing foreign policy pressures on their western and eastern flanks. These include:

-- The agreement in late July to hold unpublicized talks with the US on Afghanistan. The Soviets agreed only after repeated US declarations that the Afghan problem, among other issues, would impede any improvement in bilateral relations unless it was at least partially resolved. Although the talks revealed no change in Moscow's position, the Soviets probably regard their assent to them as both a concession and a signal of potential flexibility. The "concession" in this case involved a retreat from the previous Soviet position that the US would have to deal directly with the Karmal government, and that the USSR would discuss only the "international" aspects but not the "internal" situation, that is the military occupation. [redacted] 25X1

-- Soviet efforts to stabilize relations with China. Since early this year, the USSR has been probing again for indications that Beijing might be disposed to normalize bilateral relations. Moscow has responded positively to Peking's decision to increase trade, cultural, and scientific contacts in an apparent hope that such contacts would lead to the restoration of political contacts and negotiations. The Soviet decision almost certainly was motivated by a long-range projection that US-Soviet relations might worsen and the perception that difficulties between China and the US gave Moscow maneuverability. [redacted] 25X1

-- Soviet cultivation of selected West European governments as alternate dialogue partners to the US and Moscow's support for the peace and nuclear freeze movements. Current Soviet policy toward the West Europeans is an integral part of the longstanding strategic objective of dividing the Alliance and isolating the US. Support for the peace movement, because of the propaganda and possible military benefits the Soviets derive from it, now represents a cornerstone of Soviet policy toward the West. The most recent Soviet initiative in this regard,

Brezhnev's declaration to the UN in June of a no-first-use policy on nuclear weapons, appears to have been a controversial decision within the Soviet leadership. It represents a major tactical move that probably was possible only after Moscow had concluded that such a dramatic gesture was needed to bolster the USSR's image. [redacted] 25X1

These moves appear to be directed simultaneously at influencing US attitudes while striving to prevent Washington from establishing any international anti-Soviet partnership in the wake of the succession. These steps are almost certainly related in the first instance to Moscow's anticipation of a continuing stalemate or even a further deterioration in US-Soviet relations. [redacted] 25X1

These steps probably are also part of contingency planning for the impending succession. They are striking in their similarity to tactical initiatives that in the past accompanied rather than preceded a change in the top leadership. Anticipating the succession, Moscow appears to be probing for signs of US flexibility, but is hedging its bets by striving to develop more freedom of maneuver should the US step up pressure at a time of possible internal stress in the USSR. [redacted] 25X1

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